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## THE NATURALIST.

## No. III.

## ON THE FOOD OF ANIMALS, IN CONNEXION WITH THEIR HABITS.

THE genus *Viverra* contains the ICHNEUMON, and most animals of the *Weasel* tribe. The ICHNEUMON was so much esteemed in Egypt, on account of its destroying the eggs and young of crocodiles, and the utility it was of in cleaning the country of serpents; that the idolatrous inhabitants even venerated it with a religious adoration; and, according to Herodotus, when one of this species died it was buried in a consecrated chest. The Ichneumon devours every animated being, which it can master; quadrupeds, birds, lizards, serpents, and even insects fall victims to its ravenous appetite. It is said, that when bitten by a serpent, it has recourse to the root of a certain plant, which proves an antidote to the poison; this, however, I must consider as fabulous, although it has been insisted upon by late travellers. The habits of the other species of the genus *Viverra*, closely resemble those of the Ichneumon. They are almost all marked by that strongest proof of insatiable ferocity, the habit of destroying every animal they can reach, though not excited by the calls of hunger. Stedman mentions an instance of this rapacity in the *Viverra Vittata*, or grey Weasel, one of which in its passage from Surinam to Holland, escaped from its cage, and in one night killed "all the monkeys, parrots, and fowls, that were upon deck."

Of the genus *Mustela*, the first species are the OTTERS, and the food of all these being much the same, the consideration of the *Mustela Lutra*, or common OTTER, will answer for all.

The OTTER is extremely voracious, and lives chiefly on fishes; hence, it inhabits the banks of rivers and lakes, and commits immense havoc in fish-ponds. Its eyes, though small, are piercing and brilliant; they are placed near the nose, and in such a way, that they look upwards, and give to the head the aspect of an eel. This curious position of the eyes gives the Otter an immense advantage in taking its prey; for as it can see every thing above when in the water, and the fish can see nothing beneath them, in their usual position, it can swim below and seize them by the belly, before they are aware of their danger. Like many other animals, it delights in destroying more than it can make use of. In rivers it always swims against the stream, in hunting for prey; and it is said, that sometimes two Otters will act together in pursuit of the salmon, one stationing itself above, and the other below the place where the fish lies, and chasing it, until with

fatigue and fright it becomes their victim. In very hard weather, when the waters are frozen up, they kill lambs, rabbits, young pigs, and poultry. In spring, they also eat the young herbage, and gnaw the bark off aquatic trees. They will not eat dead fish which has not been killed by themselves, and on this account, cannot be taken in a baited trap. An instance occurs of one caught by a hook and line; in August, 1799, a gentleman trolling for pike in the river Buckland, near Dover, had his bait seized, as he imagined, from the violent struggles of the animal, by an overgrown fish, but after a long contest, he to his great astonishment, drew to the shore an Otter, completely exhausted.

The species belonging to the genus *Mustela*, besides the Otters, amount to about twenty, and are all nimble, carnivorous, and cruel. The Martin, the Ferret, and the common Weasel, will be sufficient examples.

The MARTIN is a beautiful, but a most destructive quadruped, not unfrequent in Great Britain, and found also in some parts of this island. It is as mischievous as the fox, and more destructive to pheasants, than any other beast of prey, the *wild cat* only, perhaps, excepted. It destroys much other game, poultry and small birds, and commits great havoc among their nests, by eating their eggs and young. It also enters pigeon houses and carries off both young and old.

The FERRET, when domesticated, may be fed with bran, bread, and other vegetable food, with milk; but probably when wild, is altogether carnivorous. "He is by nature," says Buffon, "a mortal enemy to the rabbit. Whenever a dead rabbit is, for the first time, presented to a young ferret, he flies upon it, and bites it with fury: but if it be alive, he seizes it by the throat or the nose, and sucks its blood;" v. 231.

The COMMON WEASEL (*Mustela Vulgaris*) is even more sanguinary than the two last. It is a most fatal enemy to the hare, which it pursues and terrifies to such a degree, that it gives itself up without resistance, expressing its terror by the most piteous outcries. It seizes the hare or rabbit near the head, and its bite is constantly mortal; for should an animal that has experienced it, escape, it never recovers; it lingers for some time, but is sure to die, although the wound is so small, that the entrance of the teeth is scarcely perceptible.

The Weasel is an animal of the most determined courage, and not only destroys chickens, and various sorts of game, but also serpents, water rats, moles, &c. An eagle, which had pounced upon a weasel, and carried it up into the air, was observed to be in great distress; the weasel had so far extricated itself from the eagle's grasp, as to lay hold of its throat, and shortly the eagle was brought to the ground, and

the weasel escaped. It is as destructive in the poultry yard, or the pigeon house, as the Martin ; it conveys its plunder to its hiding place, but does not eat it till it begins to corrupt, for it delights in putrefaction. " A peasant in my neighbourhood," says Buffon, " took three new littered weasels out of the carcase of a wolf, that had been hung on a tree by the hind feet. The wolf was almost entirely putrified, and the female weasel had made a nest of leaves and herbage for her young, in the thorax of this putrid carcase."

The next genus (*Ursus*) contains the Bears, the Badgers, the Raccoon, and the Wolverine, or Glutton.

The *Ursus Arctos*, or COMMON BEAR, of which there are several varieties, both in the old and new Continents, lives principally on fruits, roots, acorns, and other vegetable food. He enters the cultivated fields and eats yams and potatoes ; and is so excessively fond of honey and milk, that when he falls in with either, he will rather die than leave them. Indeed, one of the easiest modes of managing the bear, is to intoxicate him with honey mixed with spirits. The brown Bear is carnivorous, but the black is not, except that the male devours the young cubs when he can get to them. They live sometimes on insects, which they catch by swimming with their mouths open. Hearne, in his Journey to the Northern Ocean, saw in 1774, eleven Bears killed in one day's journey, the flesh of which was abominable, from their living entirely on water insects. " There was not one of the Bears" he says, " killed that day, which had not its stomach as full of those insects (only) as ever a hog's was with grains, and when cut open, the stench from them was intolerable." The insects alluded to were of two kinds, the one with a hard skin resembled a grasshopper, and the other was soft like the common cleg. " The latter," continues Mr. Hearne, " are the most numerous ; and in some of the lakes, such quantities of them are forced into the bays in gales of wind, and there pressed together in such multitudes, that they are killed, and remain there a great nuisance ; for I have several times, in my inland voyages from York Fort, found it nearly impossible to land in some of these bays, for the intolerable stench of those insects, which, in some places, were lying in putrid masses to the depth of two or three feet. It is more than probable, that the bears occasionally feed on these dead insects." The abstinence of the Bears is very remarkable : in high latitudes they retire to their winter-quarters, before the snow becomes deep, and remain there even four months without food. It is a vulgar opinion, that during this time they chiefly live by sucking their paws ; and I am inclined to think, that in this there is some truth, for before the winter sets in, they sometimes so

abound in fat, that on the sides and thighs it is not less than ten inches deep ; and it is asserted, that a milky juice flows from the feet when wounded, and that the latter have very numerous papillæ. If this be true, I think it not at all improbable, that the fat when absorbed and carried into the circulation, may be determined to the feet, and there converted into a milky and nutritious secretion.

The WHITE, or POLAR BEAR (*Ursus Maritimus*) is carnivorous, and lives on seals, walruses, and dead whales ; he will attack men, and tear up dead bodies. Lade says, in the river Rupper, he killed two sea Bears of a prodigious size, which attacked the hunters with such impetuosity, as to kill several savages, and wound two Englishmen. They are so very fat, that a single carcase has afforded one hundred pounds weight. The American and the Sand Bears, feed like the Common.

The BADGER, though not mischievous or ravenous, prefers raw flesh to every other food ; and in former times, when hunting the Badger was a favourite amusement, it was usual to draw a piece of pork over the entrance of his habitation, to entice him from it. In the wild state, however, his food consists principally of roots, insects, and frogs ; but the female when she has young, robs bee hives, seizes young rabbits in their burrows, lays hold of field mice, lizards, birds, eggs, &c. and conveys them to the young ones.

"The RACCOON," says Buffon, "softens, or rather dilutes in water, every thing he intends to eat. He throws his bread into the bason that holds his water ; and unless pressed with hunger, he does not remove it till it be well soaked. But, when very hungry, he eats dry food or any thing that is presented to him. He searches about, and eats every thing that he can find ; as flesh either dried or prepared, fishes, eggs, living fowls, grain, roots, &c. He likewise devours all kinds of insects ; he delights in hunting spiders ; and when at liberty in the garden, he eats grasshoppers, snails, and worms. He loves sugar, milk, and other soft kind of nourishment, except fruit ; but all these he rejects, when he can have flesh or fish."—*Buff. vi.* p. 157. Raccoons are also fond of crabs, and at low water look for oysters, which may be open, and snatch out the fish with their paw. It is said, that sometimes the oyster when firmly attached to a rock, closes upon the Raccoon's foot and holds him fast, till the tide coming in drowns him.

The GLUTTON is of all animals, perhaps, the most voracious ; his legs are not made for running, but this deficiency is supplied by his cunning. His usual mode of taking his prey, is to watch upon the branch of a tree, till some animal passes beneath, when he darts down upon its back and there sticks fast, gnawing its flesh, till the animal, however large it

may be, is destroyed. It is asserted, that he drops large bunches of the rein-deer liver wort below the branch on which he is placed, and so attracts the deer within his reach. He enters the habitation of the beavers, and devours both old and young; and he can even hunt fish like the otter. He is fearless of man, but more I apprehend from inexperience than courage. Hearne says, he "once saw one of them take possession of a deer that an Indian had killed, and though the Indian advanced within twenty yards, he would not relinquish his claim to it, but suffered himself to be shot standing on the deer."—p. 373.

The genus *Didelphis*, contains about two and twenty species, which live upon birds, insects, and worms, and sometimes grain and vegetables. I find little remarkable among them, with respect to the food or manner of taking it, except in one species, the *Virginian Opossum*. This animal is extremely fond of birds, and boldly enters court-yards and hen houses. When he kills a small bird, he lays it down in an exposed situation near a tree; "he then mounts the tree, suspends himself by the tail, on a branch which is nearest to the bird, and waits patiently till some carnivorous bird comes to carry it off, upon which he instantly darts, and makes a prey of both."

The MOLES which form the next genus, live upon worms and the larvæ and pupæ of insects; and the SHREW MICE, which constitute the genus following, use the same food. There is nothing remarkable in the habits of either.

The genus *Erinaceus* contains the HEDGEHOGS, an innocent race of animals, which live on roots and insects. The Common Hedgehog lies torpid all winter, and consequently during that season, does not require food; at all times it eats very little. In summer, fallen fruits, roots, and insects, which they turn out of the mould, form its principal subsistence. It can do without drink, but the young are so voracious, that they remain at the breast for several hours at a time.

The PORCUPINES, which next follow, feed chiefly on roots; the common one prefers the root of the box; but the Brazilian Porcupine feeds also on small birds.

The species of the genus *Cavia*, live all upon vegetables, except the Capibara, which, like the otter, can swim and dive well, and chiefly lives upon fishes. The GUINEA PIG is the species best known; it eats every hour both day and night, and always vegetables, of which it prefers the parsley.

Animals of the genus *Castor*, or BEAVER, live on the bark of various trees, and lay up a magazine for the winter; the Chilese Beaver feeds on fish and crales.

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